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AUTHOR Koo, Jang H.
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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges from a practical point of view the idea that the phonemic principle is the most adequate or the optimal theoretical basis for devising a romanized alphabet for a language. In the past, romanization of languages, written or unwritten, have largely been based on the phonemic principle and have unnecessarily burdened the learner with the task of memorizing phonological rules. In the present paper, a strict distinction is made between a romanization for a practical purpose (i.e., for a foreigner) and a romanization for a scientific linguistic purpose (i.e., for a native speaker), because the learner does not have the same competence in the target language as the native speaker. Furthermore, a language is romanized, not for its native speakers who can read the language in their native writing system, but rather for those who do not use the same writing system. Korean is used as an example to demonstrate how romanization can be free of as many phonological rules as possible, and adhere as far as possible to the principle of "one sound, one symbol." (Author)

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On The Phonemic Principle and Romanization of Korean

Jang H. Koo

Univ. of Alaska

The present paper challenges, from a practical point of view, the idea that the phonemic principle is the most adequate or the optimal theoretical basis for devising a practical alphabetic orthography or a romanized alphabet for a language, written or unwritten. Such a phonemic system which can only be arrived at by painstaking phonological analysis, is supposedly free of all linguistic redundancies; yet it does not guarantee that such an alphabet constructs the correct mental images representing the messages that the native speaker wants to impart (i.e. the speaker's tacit or unconscious knowledge).

Recently the concept of psychological reality has been seriously questioned by some linguists (such as Hale: 1973; Derwing: 1973; Hsieh: 1975; Campbell: 1974). According to their experiments, underlying linguistic representations (in our case phonemic units) do not necessarily correspond to their psychological realities. In other words, internal evidence and argumentation are not sufficient to establish the validity of phonemic description. Especially when it comes to the question of romanization, does the phonemic principle seem to fail in practice, because the learner does not share the same competence of the target language as the native speaker. Moreover, the phonemics-orientated system lacks a close correspondence between sounds and letters (or symbols), thus requiring phonological rules for the derivation of the pronounciation; and it is harder to learn the system when a phonemic representation does not refer directly to anything on the surface (Kiparsky: 1971).

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Romanization is meaningful only when it is devised for some linguistic purpose or for the benefit of those who cannot read the language in the native writing system. Romanization does not exist for the native speakers of the language who can read the language in their native system without the help of romanization; but it does exist for those who do not use the same writing system as the target language.

In romanizing a writing system, symbols used should represent the sounds of pronounced, because one's success in learning the romanization of the language depends largely on one's ability to recognize the relationship between sounds and symbols. That is to say, the fewer phonological rules there are, the better the romanization is. Therefore, it is meaningless to apply the phonemic principle in romanization of the language. We must thus recognize that there is a strict disparity between a romanization for a practical purpose (i.e. for a foreigner) and a romanization for a scientific linguistic purpose.

In romanization, we need also contrastive information in order to minimize linguistic interference. The romanized alphabet should, therefore, conform as closely as practical to the language of the learner. More specifically, symbols should be motivated by practical consequences, so that we can achieve its objective most effectively and in the shortest possible time. One way we can avoid linguistic interference is not to create rules unnecessarily since learning such rules is laborious, and frequently results in confusion and delay in the learning process. Let us consider the following examples of Korean romanizations:

(1) A, annyəng hasimnikka, ... (Park, 1968: 23)
(Oh, how are you, ...)

(2) Cacu yənghwa polə kaci yo. (Park, 1968: 236)
(I go to see the movie frequently.)

(3) Kugøs un hanguk-mal ch'aeg ipnida. (Lee, 1965: 8)
(That is a Korean language book.)

(4) Chøgøs un muøs ipnigga? (Lee, 1965: 9)
(What is that over there?)

(5) Ŏdi sŏ kŭ ton ŭl ch'ajŏsse yo?[2] (Martin, 1954: 59)
(Where did you find the money?)

(6) Kŭ saram i kogi rŭl mŏkchi mot hae yo. (Martin, 1954: 59)
(He doesn't eat meat (at all).)

(7) Sikku ga manch'i man ton i ŏpse yo. (Martin, 1954: 68)
(I have a big family, but I haven't any money.)

(8) Kukøt umsikjøm imnita. (Lukoff, 1945: 120)
(That's a restaurant.)

(9) Kyøulen jham jhupko, nunto maniomnita. (Lukoff, 1945: 182)
(It is very cold in winter, and it snows a lot, too.)

(10) Haemada bomi omyon sangwa dure nun arumdaun ggotduri piyonagonman ... (from the song "Though Spring comes Every Year," The Pyongyang Times, Oct. 6, 1973)
(Though every spring flowers bloom in the mountains and in the fields...)

In (1), the si and ni of hasimnikka, which are clearly the phonemic representations of [ši] and [ñi] respectively, are not desirable in the romanization, because the learner is unnecessarily burdened with a task of learning two rules:

Rule I. s ⟶ š / ____ i

Rule II. n ⟶ ñ / ____ i

or

Rule III. $\begin{bmatrix} C \\ +\text{anterior} \\ +\text{coronal} \end{bmatrix} \longrightarrow [+\text{high}] \; / \; \underline{\quad} \; \begin{bmatrix} -\text{consonant} \\ +\text{high} \\ +\text{front} \end{bmatrix}$

That is, he has to learn that the s before the high vowel i is pronounced as [š] (Rule I), and that the n before the i is pronounced as [ñ] (Rule II). More generally, he has to learn Rule III, which collapses Rules I and II, and says that when an alveolar segment such as s, n, and t is followed by i, then the alveolar segment is palatalized as [š], [ñ], and [č] respectively (sin [šin] 'shoes'; kamani [kamañi] 'quietly'; kuti [kuči] 'stubbornly').

In (2), the l and c of pole kaci are again phonemic representations of [ř] and [j], and the learner is thus confronted with at least another two rules. They are: a rule which says that the intervocalic l is to be pronounced as [ř]; and a rule which says that the intervocalic c is to be pronounced as [j]. That is:

Rule IV. $l \longrightarrow \check{r} \;/\; V ___ V$

Rule V. $c \longrightarrow \check{j} \;/\; V ___ V$

In (3) and (4), the k and p of hanguk-mal, ipnida, and ipnigga are phonemic representations, which requires one very general rule converting the k and p to the [ŋ] and [m] before a nasal (i.e., Nasal assimilation rule: [+consonant] ⟶ [+nasal] / ___ + [+nasal]); whereas d of ipnida is clearly the phonetic realization of the phoneme /t/ in an intervocalic position, thus requiring no rules. It is, however, unclear whether gg of ipnigga in (4) is meant to represent a phonemic or phonetic segment, because the Korean fortis stop ㄲ does not charge its unvoicing feature to the voicing one in an intervocalic environment.

A romanization should, ideally, be based on the principle "one sound one symbol", avoiding phonetic symbols, diacritical marks and/or diagraphs wherever possible. The ə and c in (1) and (2) are, apparently, phonetic symbols which require some sort of phonetic explanation for a student learning Korean who has no phonetic background, since the symbol c before a back vowel (i.e. a or u) represents [k] and, before a high vowel, [s] in languages such as English and Spanish. According to my experiment (performed on May 17, 1975), none of the ten subjects in the experiment pronounced caku and kaci as [caku] and [kaći]; but they unanimously pronounced them as [kaku] and [kasi] instead. The subjects were native speakers of American English, who have never been exposed to Korean, and who have never taken a course in phonetics.

In practice, it is, however, often necessary and widely practised to introduce conventions which have the effect of utilizing more than one symbol (i.e., eiagraphs) to denote one sound. The prupose of using diagraphs is, mainly, to refrain from the introduction of unfamiliar phonetic symbols or diacritics which are not fourd on a regular typewriter and are awkward and cumbersome to write. For example, the diagraphs ch' in (5) and jh in (9) represent the sound ㅊ [c^h]and the diacritic ◡ over the o of odi in (5), together with the o, represents ㅓ [ɔ].

The question is how one romanization system can be evaluated against another system for its adequacy. As an evaluation device, it is possible, however, to set up categories which are envolved in a romanization. Such categories may be hierarchically arranged in descending order:

I. Phonological Rules;
II. Phonetic Symbols;
III. Diacritics;
IV. Diagraphs.

It follows, then, that the system that employs fewer in each category and in a lower hierarchy should be evaluated as better. In other words, the less the system is violated in each category (i.e., fewer rules and fewer phonetic symbols and/or diacritics), the more adequate it is. Thus, a system which requires more rules for the derivation of correct pronounciation and fewer diacritics should be evaluated as less desirable than a system which requires fewer rules for the correct pronounciation and more diacritics.

Footnotes

1. Martin's transcription is based on the McCune-Reischauer System. Notice that the McCune-Reischauer System and the Lukoff System are largely the same except that the former is more phonetic, as the Hepburn Romanization is than the Nipponsiki Romanization in Japanese. It is also noted that most romanization systems presently used are, strictly speaking, neither phonetic nor phonemic; they are "mixed" systems (i.e., partly phonetic and partly phonemic).

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